

VZCZCXR08253

RR RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHNEH
DE RUEHKKT #0379 1270346
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 070346Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0141
INFO RUEAEPA/EPA WASHDC 0049
RUEHRC/USDA WASHDC
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7265
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 2587
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 5309
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RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 0314
RUEHNEH/AMCONSUL HYDERABAD 0020
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4004

UNCLAS KATHMANDU 000379

DEPT FOR OES/PCI, OES/ENRC, SCA/INS, SCA/RA
USAID FOR ANE/SAA
EPA FOR OIA FREEMAN
USDA FOR ARS, FS, AND APHIS

SIPDIS

REF: 07 KATHMANDU 731

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV TBIO EAGR XD NP

SUBJECT: HARD TIMES FOR SOUTH ASIA'S HONEY BEES

Summary

¶1. An eight-month drought in Nepal has reduced honey production by half and will contribute to rising prices of edible oil during the monsoon season. Although generally not affected by colony collapse disorder (CCD), honey bees in South Asia have to contend with an increasing population of parasitic mites and the uncertain effects of the growing Atmospheric Brown Cloud (ABC) covering South Asia.

What's Hurting South Asia's Bees?

¶2. In a recent discussion with one of South Asia's leading apiologists, the Regional Environmental Officer (REO) learned that the region's bees are experiencing hard times due to the effects of an eight-month drought, parasitic mites, and the ABC. In Nepal, where bee keepers have lost 50 percent of their honey crop, these conditions will lead to a sharp fall in mustard seed production and a rise in imports and prices of edible oils. However, with enough rain the bee population can recover relatively quickly and, in fact, Nepal's bees are in better shape than bees in many other parts of South Asia.

¶3. In Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Indian states of Punjab and Haryana, parasitic varroa mites have destroyed 70 percent of the bee populations. Bees introduced from Europe are particularly vulnerable to these mites which are a spreading menace. Indigenous bee species adapt by leaving their hives when mites are present in large numbers. Mites can also be controlled with formic acid, a highly toxic chemical which is in use in Nepal, but is not widely used in other South Asian countries.

¶4. Colony collapse disorder (CCD) has appeared in Afghanistan where it is linked to imports of artificial bees wax containing harmful bacterial spores. CCD is not present in other South Asian countries although some farmers do practice migratory bee keeping, which has been associated with widespread CCD in the United States. The layer of soot that builds up in the atmosphere over South Asia in the dry season, known as the ABC, may also be a factor in the decline of the region's bee populations. ABC tends to keep bees in their hives leading apiologists to suspect that bees are unable to orient themselves. The effect of forest fires on bee behavior is also not

clear.

Bee Research

¶5. There are several other areas of apiological research relevant to South Asia. Quantifying the contribution of bees to maintaining healthy, productive ecosystems is an aspect of the discussion of payment for environmental services. Payments for protecting the natural environment can provide a much needed source of income to rural communities, especially when their livelihoods depend heavily on the environment. Scientists are also studying the stomachs of bees to identify beneficial bacteria and ways to stimulate its growth. More beneficial bacteria could lead to a greater honey harvests. In addition, the Kathmandu-based International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is working with South Asian governments to improve honey production methods with a goal of increasing exports.

Comment

¶6. Additional research and management practices are necessary to improve South Asia's honey bee industry. For example, Nepal, which produced 1,400 metric tons of honey in 2008, has the potential to produce 7,000 metric tons according to experts. However, honey is not the most valuable product derived from bees. As pollinators, they are essential to maintaining the rich biodiversity of the South Asian subcontinent.

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